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ABSTRACT

A series of four proposals for foreign language teachers suggesting the development of a "sales" approach to generate student motivation for language study is developed in this study. A brief analysis of advertising procedures used in television commercials underscores the importance of consumer motivation in sales programs. (RL)

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THE SELLING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

an address delivered at the Colloquium

of the NEW YORK STATE ASSOCIATION OF
FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

May 5, 1972

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As a native New Yorker, I have always believed that New York led the nation in most desirable endeavors, especially in Education. However, within the last months, two major movements have established California as the leader.

One movement concerned the landmark decision involving a more equitable means of financing public education than through property tax.

The second is the momentous position paper on foreign languages, delivered by William Riles, California State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

I shall return to this statement later in my address.

But, ladies and gentlemen, I am a traitor!

Yes, I admit it. A traitor.

First, believe it or not, I shall not mention the National French Contest. I don't have to. It is already eminently successful.

Second, I no longer read books on foreign language methodology; instead, I read books on salesmanship.

Third, I no longer urge students to sign up for a 3, 4, or (Lord help me) 6 year F.L. sequence. Instead, I urge students to sign up for one year, even a 10 week mini-course. I will take a smaller profit rather than lose the sale.

And, since I am the last speaker at this session I shall be unduly considerate and advise you that you have heard all the good things you're going to hear about F.L. this morning. If you want to leave, do so now. I'll turn my back to save you some embarrassment.

I am indeed shocked, but pleasantly so, to see most of you still here.

Is it politeness?

Or, maybe it's just too early for lunch?

Or, maybe, just maybe, you are traitors, too?

Then, prepare for a sales talk. And, following the sales talk, I shall offer this convention four dramatic proposals and shall urge their unanimous ratification.

I am not an educator now. You are not teachers. I am your sales manager and you are my worst salesmen. You cannot sell our company's best product. And, what I cannot fathom is that your livelihood depends on your selling of this product.

No sales ... no job!

I advise you - no, I urge you, to become better salesmen. It's easier than you think! You don't have to be creative at all. Examples of excellent salesmanship are all around you.

Just try to watch an hour of television without 14 messages.

Each message is the result of top talent, sales-oriented talent with hundreds of thousands of dollars to spend just to sell a 30 cent bottle of beer, a 69 cent tube of toothpaste, a 21 cent roll of Charman.

I have analyzed the top commercials and find that they have 3 sales features in common:

1. Convince the consumer that he must buy your brand name.
2. Convince your consumer that he only has to try your product once and he'll be convinced.

3. Convince your consumer that your brand name item will help him sexually or, at least, financially.

By product I mean, of course, foreign languages, and your brand name is French, German, Italian, Latin, Spanish, etc.

I can see by your smiles that some of you are beginning to catch on.

Let's go to feature #1:

Convince the consumer that he has to <u>buy</u> your brand name, not that he <u>needs</u> the over-all product.

Did you ever hear a Chrysler or Ford commercial tell you why you need a <u>car</u>? No, it's why you must buy a Fury, a Pinto, or an LTD.

Take a page from the best salesman. He will admit that there are other products similar to his on the market. He then has to convince you that <u>his</u> product is superior.

By doing so, he has focused his customer's attention on the product, and the customer only has to select the <u>brand name</u> he prefers.

Active, dynamic, clear salesmanship will focus the student's attention on foreign languages. Debates, competitive games, posters, contests, will deluge the student into having to decide <u>which</u> foreign language he is to take, not <u>whether</u> he has to take one at all. Stop publishing briefs entitled <u>Why Study Foreign Languages</u>? You are implying that students don't really have to.

Compete publicly for consumers to attract them to your brand name.

Your promotional literature should carry the theme: Why you should study French, Why Spanish? Why Italian? and so on.

Sales feature #2

Convince your consumer that he has to try your brand name only once; the implication is that he will be convinced. And, once convinced, he will buy it again.

Our major mistake has been that we put strings on our offer. Our past pitch has been negative: "Don't take Spanish for one year. You don't learn anything. It's not enough. Besides, you won't even get school credit for it."

What snobbishness!

I dare you to find any other product that has been so exclusive.

As I perused the program, I saw the title of another address: "How to Beat the 'You only need two years of Foreign Language' Syndrome." The speaker happens to be one of the most charming young ladies that the Lord has ever seen fit to put on this earth: Helene Loew. And, Helene, if you are out there, I urge you to reconsider! If you plan to advise these salesmen to sell their product on the basis of a 3 or 4 year committment, forget it! This is not the time!

Our students do not have the values of our generation; the patience of our age was founded in a respect for tradition and an acceptance of the divine power of an educational system to tell us what is right.

Our children have fashioned a different society, born out of our failures. In the past, children have been the captives of adults.

This is no longer so.

And I see by some reluctant nods that the parents in our midst know what I am talking about.

Our children have adopted the baseball syndrome: hit and run. Don't wait interminably for the pitch you like: you may take a called 3rd strike.

We have not fashioned a society of long-range plans. Our sales pitch is geared to instant wealth, instant smile, instant coffee, instant success, instant life. Never tell your reluctant consumer how long he has to use your brand name in order to gain its benefits.

Does Crest toothpaste tell you that if you use it three times daily for 3 or 4 years, you will have fewer cavities? No. "With your first brushing you will notice dramatic differences." Try that approach the next time you talk with students.

The third sales feature is: Convince your consumer that your brand name item will help him sexually or, at least, financially.

Have you ever heard or read a commercial that promised broader horizons or intellectual prowess? No. Drink Maxwell House Coffee for breakfast. Your husband will put his newspaper down and notice that you had your nose fixed seven years ago. He will hold your hand and say, "I love you".

If you feel uncomfortable talking about the sexual advantages of your brand name, then focus on the economic advantages. These are probably your strongest sales features.

Ask yourselves why a student should study your language.

Let's be honest. We need to keep our jobs. That's the main reason. But schools are not in business merely to give employment to teachers. So, while we accept that objective as our own private one, we must study the business world. The business world exists and thrives because of a hard-driving unique talent; to sell a product by making the customer believe that he always wanted it and could not live without it.

We buy $5,000 cars we can ill-afford, but must have white-wall tires to make the car look complete.

We buy trash cans but we must buy plastic trash liners in order to keep our trash cans clean.

We buy these products because they are well-sold, not because we need them.

With the foreign language, the reverse is true. We know that children need to learn a foreign language but we know not how to sell it.

Let me offer an approach.

Sell your foreign language because it will offer the customer security, success, and a rich career.

The next wave in education will focus on a New thrust to Career-Oriented Education.

While we may intellectualize that knowing French or Italian may afford us a deeper sense of beauty in Art, Cuisine, Music, these objectives are too abstract for frenetic freshman.

Talk in terms of practicality. "Learn Spanish and double your earning power."

"Learn French and a thousand careers unfurl."

Do your homework! Find out the careers that can be the result of knowing the language you teach. Develop a Career Fair, Career Conference. Talk relevance, not intellectualism.

Of course there is a need for intellectualism. We could not survive as a profession without it. But, first get the consumers. Once we have our students in our clutches, then our best teaching is directed to motivate the student to continue beyond the first year. Then, we speak of the cultural heritage, the profound literary movements, the unique contributions to Art and Music. But, first we need an audience. Without that 1st year group, we have nothing.

Therein lies the challenge of salesmanship.

We may think that our battle is won because we may get a new Principal or Board member who is sympathetic to F.L. But, if you know your Old Testament, a great moral lesson in salesmanship is taught in the story of Joseph. Joseph grew to be the foremost figure in ancient Egypt, only to die. Exodus reports: "There arose in Egypt a new king who knew not Joseph". A good product, a good service, a good cause must be sold all the time. Because every day a Joseph dies and every day there arise new kings who knew not Joseph.

We, as foreign language educators, have a unique product: a product of today; a now product; a relevant product; a product of involvement and instant communication; an ecological product in that the earth grows richer in proportion to the number of people who understand and communicate with each other.

Don't wait for another Sputnik. And, on that theme, how many French teachers used the moon location named Descartes in the Apollo 16 mission as a sales approach to French?

This is not the educational system that you and I were born into. But, this is where it's at now.

I now turn to the 4 dramatic proposals I alluded to earlier. I offer these without humility, without apology.

President Moore, officers, delegates and members of the New York State Association of Foreign Language teachers. For your serious consideration:

Proposal I: I propose that NYSAFLT initiate a search for an outstanding Advertising agency to develop a dynamic sales campaign for each language.

Proposal 2: I propose that NYSAFLT establish a Commission on Vocational Opportunities in Foreign Languages. I recommend that this commission consist of representatives, teachers and students, of every foreign language.

Proposal 3: I propose that the next NYSAFLT Annual Conference carry the theme Career-Oriented Education in Foreign Languages. To this conference, I propose that an invitation be extended to each school to send a team consisting of a language teacher, an administrator, a guidance counselor and a student.

Proposal 4: I propose that the Association petition New York State Commissioner of Edcuation Nyquist to emulate the brilliant statement of William Riles, California State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Superintendent Riles wrote, and I quote, "The responsibilities of all agencies of public education as they relate to foreign language instruction in California should be the same as they are for other subjects in the curriculum."

Ladies and gentlemen, unless your retirement plans are but a few weeks away, I urge you to become involved in the greatest sales force today: selling a product whose benefits we can vouch for to a consumer who must be and can be sold on those benefits.